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SUBJECT: "ALEVI OPENING" MEETS WITH ALEVI SKEPTICISM

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. The GOT announced plans to discuss at its final Alevi workshop Alevi concerns related to the recognition of their cem houses as places of worship, ending compulsory religious instruction, and opening a special institute to train Alevi clerics. The Alevi population does not agree on how to define itself and is divided among many organizations (reftel), but they are largely unified in their skepticism of the GOT's sincerity toward Alevis in the AKP's National Unity Project. According to a survey conducted by Eurasian Public Research Center, only 11 percent of Alevis believe that the GOT is sincere. They point to what they perceive as the AKP's strong Sunni Islam bias as a negative variable in the likelihood of cem houses being provided official status by the GOT. Additionally, some Alevi organizations - such as Pir Sultan Abdal - note that even if cem evler were recognized, the Alevis would never vote for the AKP given their suspicions of the AKP's religious objectives. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Turkish secularist dailies including "Haberturk" and "Cumhuriyet" reported recently on the GOT's plans to hold its final Alevi workshop in which it will outline a roadmap for an "Alevi opening," an aspect of the National Unity Project first announced following the AKP's winter retreat in Kizilcihamam in early December 2009. According to Haberturk, the GOT will discuss with (largely non-Alevi) participants four steps proposed for addressing the concerns of the Alevis, including the following:

- Giving the status of places of worship to cem houses.
- Altering Article 24 of the Constitution to end compulsory religious instruction in schools.
- Opening a special institute to train Alevi clerics.
- Extending financial support to cem houses and partially covering their water and electricity expenses.

Although not clarified in news coverage, the official designation as a place of worship automatically provides for financial support from the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in the form of subsidized utilities. Some Alevi leaders, however, fear that with Diyanet support also comes Diyanet control, and are worried about the Diyanet trying to control the messages put forth in Alevi services. At this time, only Sunni mosques and the places of worship of officially-recognized minority community foundations receive such subsidies (and controls).

¶3. (SBU) The GOT's ongoing quarterly Alevi workshops have received much criticism from largely boycotting Alevi organizations who consider them to be empty and gratuitous. The leader of the Istanbul branch of Pir Sultan Abdal Alevi association labeled them insulting. He and the association

board members noted that only one Alevi organization, Ehl-i Beyt, participates in these workshops. They label Ehl-i Beyt a "shia group in bed with the AKP." Izzetin Dogan, president of the Cem Vakfi (foundation) representing a more moderate and less leftist Alevi population, also said he considers the workshops "a joke" and insincere. While most Alevi organizations surveyed are encouraged by the idea of an "Alevi opening," they remain skeptical of the GOT's sincerity given what they perceive as the AKP's Sunni Islam religious objectives and perspectives. Such perspectives, Dogan and even Fermani Altun of the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation noted, make it difficult for the AKP to reconcile their belief that Alevism is a heterodox form of Islam with the possibility of formally recognizing Alevi cem houses as places of worship. According to previous discussions with representatives of the Diyanet, the recognition of cem houses as places of worship would be akin to the recognition of Alevism as a non-heterodox form of Islam - something they would not permit.

¶4. (SBU) "Cumhuriyet" also reported that Alevis are suspicious about the GOT's proposed opening. The paper reported on an undated survey conducted by Eurasian Public Research Center which showed that 33.9 percent of Alevis said they are the target of permanent discrimination. Another 36.4 percent said they sometimes face discrimination. Only 11 percent believe that the GOT is sincere toward Alevis in its National Unity Project.

¶5. (SBU) Comment. While the AKP seems keen to reach out to many different communities across the country (from Kurds to Greek Orthodox to Alevis) during its National Unity Project, GOT action on these issues has been insufficient to earn support among Alevis. If the AKP wants to see any electoral gains from its efforts, it will need to deliver, and soon, on some of its promises. The AKP was pummeled with public criticism for the rapid speed with which they advanced discussions about the National Unity Project. The party suggested that its current slower pace is in response to this criticism, an attempt to allow for the "digestion" of the proposed reforms.

¶6. (SBU) Comment Continued: Lack of engagement with Alevi organizations outside of the Eyl-i Beyt, whom many see as in bed with the AKP, will likely continue to prevent the "Alevi Opening" from gaining traction. The AKP will have to work very hard to prove its sincerity - possibly through action rather than words - before other Alevi groups will consider joining the workshops.

DAYTON